

University of Western Sydney academics strike over worsening conditions

Mike Head

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During a half-day strike and picket yesterday, young academics at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) voiced concern over the deteriorating conditions that they and their students face. Ever-greater workloads, larger class sizes and increasing use of casual and short-term contract employment are having a devastating impact.

The main trade union covering academics, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), called the work stoppage to protest against the university management's stalling on negotiations for a new three-year enterprise agreement with the union. Talks with the university's bargaining representatives from Maddocks, a major law firm, have dragged on since March.

Along with other universities across the country, UWS is seeking to further increase workloads, remove all limitations on the casualisation of the workforce and erode conditions, such as redundancy entitlements, while imposing real wage cuts. The involvement of a corporate law firm underscores the management's determination to push through far-reaching changes.

Comments by academics on yesterday's picket line, however, showed that there is far wider discontent, including over the dramatic erosion of working conditions already permitted by the previous enterprise agreements signed by the NTEU, and the underlying damage caused by the former Labor government's "education revolution," which was supported and enforced by the NTEU.

A social sciences lecturer, employed on an insecure two-year contract, estimated that about 20 of the 60 academic staff in his school were now on similar short-term contracts. As a "Career Development Fellow," he was under constant pressure to teach larger classes, run summer courses and undertake extra tasks, such as unit coordination, in order to secure a contract extension. Classes smaller than 80 were being eliminated.

"We were promised eventual conversion to

permanency," the lecturer said, "but there has been no indication of that." He also opposed the creation of "teaching focused" positions that required up to 18 hours a week of class time. "This is a poisoned chalice," he said, "with no career prospects." In addition, UWS was transferring many first-year courses to UWS College, a diploma-level institution largely staffed by casualised teachers with even worse conditions, bigger workloads and lower wages.

"This has Tony Blair's 'reforms' written all over it," the lecturer commented, drawing a parallel between the technical college-style "new universities" established by the former British Labour government and the Rudd-Gillard "education revolution." Students became "clients" in dumbed-down courses that were easier to pass but more expensive to complete, and "they don't appreciate that either." He added: "This is part of Labor's downfall. Why on earth would people vote Labor if it presented no left-wing, working class alternative?"

Another lecturer, currently in a one-year teaching-only position after an initial six-month contract, said his school was moving to the greater use of such contracts, and UWS College, as a way to "destroy tenure." He and others like him could be retrenched with no redundancy pay. "We've got to make stand!" he declared. "If we take action like this, the university can say it doesn't want us, but we're here for all of us, including at other unis. Without tenure, there is no research and no institutional commitment."

A social sciences lecturer said she had just secured her first permanent post after working as a casual since 2000. "We keep getting asked to do more and more with less and less. Students' conditions are being eroded too, especially via 'blended learning' [replacement of classes by online material]. I keep getting told, 'just do one more task.' It's the story of my life." She added: "The so-called education revolution is all about universities getting greater numbers, not quality, and the students don't know

that.”

As part of its previous enterprise agreement, the NTEU proposed a variety of new contract positions, such as teaching-only short-term contracts, supposedly as a means of lessening the use of casual lecturers (employed semester-by-semester for teaching only) and providing opportunities for new academics. As the WSWS warned three years ago (“Australia: Academics’ union makes key concessions at University of Western Sydney”), such provisions, inserted into NTEU agreements nationally, gave UWS and other universities the “flexibility” they demanded to increasingly dispense with tenured staff.

In the current enterprise agreement talks, the NTEU is going further down that path, calling for a new classification, Scholarly Teaching Fellows, described as “teaching based” with “a research component.” The union is pushing for these positions in all the new enterprise agreements it is pursuing across the country—again on the pretext of providing opportunities for casual academics. In reality, the union’s agreements with universities have helped to casualise the workforce. By the NTEU’s own estimates, of the 200,000 employees of public universities, only 68,000 have continuing employment. Another 45,000 are on fixed-term contracts, while 86,000 are “regular casuals.”

Over the past two years, the union has also stifled the resistance of its members to job cuts at UWS and many other universities, including Sydney, Macquarie, NSW, Bond, Victoria, La Trobe and the Australian National University. At UWS, more than 50 academic redundancies and numbers of course closures were imposed at the end of last year.

Far from fighting the UWS cuts, the NTEU appealed to the management to “let us be part of the solution.” Union members in individual schools were urged to become involved in “working groups” to propose alternative cost-cutting measures (see: “University of Western Sydney victimises Professor Steve Keen”). Once again, the union functioned as an instrument for the UWS management and the Labor government to impose their agenda.

The job losses throughout universities, and the accompanying assault on staff and student conditions, will only escalate in the coming period, first under the impact of the Labor government’s \$2.3 billion worth of funding cuts, announced last year and earlier this year. The Abbott Liberal-National government is now implementing those cuts, and preparing new ones as part of its wholesale austerity program.

Under Labor’s “education revolution,” enrolments rose,

particularly in business-related courses, but real funding per student dropped, placing intense pressure on already chronically-underfunded public universities. Institutions were compelled to undercut each other to secure enrolments, with any fall-off in enrolments in less commercial areas, such as humanities and languages, met by course shut downs.

The NTEU, together with the main university general staff union, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), backed Labor’s election, claiming it would inaugurate a new era for higher education. They then set about suppressing the resistance of university employees to the resulting cost-cutting and undermining of conditions, helping to pave the way for the Abbott government to deepen the attack.

To defeat this ongoing assault, university workers need to take matters out of the hands of the NTEU and CPSU, which have for decades assisted the vocationalisation and commercialisation of tertiary education by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments.

This means forming rank-and-file committees to launch an independent political struggle, across all tertiary institutions, and seek support among teachers, parents, students and workers, who oppose the offensive against public education. This requires the fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies, including the provision of free, high-quality education, at every level from kindergarten to university, as a basic social right.



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